

Peel the Scars From Off My Back by [orphan_account](#)

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Summary:

Will finds out he's not as alone as he thinks he is, or: Mike comforts Will in the aftermath of his return from the upside down.

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Author's Note:

This was written for a prompt received by an anonymous friend on tumblr! Original prompt:

Would you be willing to write a fic with byeler and mikes comforting will about the upside down? Like, will is scared from a nightmare during a sleep over and mike helps him calm down? I think about this a lot and I want my son to be comforted from his trauma

I hope you enjoy, anon!

Title taken from the Radicalface song [Welcome Home](#).

After returning from the upside down, Will ends up avoiding his friends a lot outside of school, especially when they mention the word *sleepover*. It's not that he doesn't want to see them, but the nightmares and panic attacks come to him in an onslaught that feels too real. It's difficult to spend time with them when he's never sure when the walls are going to melt away from around him and he'll be back there - back in the cold and dark, running endlessly from something that wants him so intently.

They try not to pester him too much about skipping out on most of their plans, but after Will's tenth time refusing an invitation to sleep over at Mike's house, Mike finally snaps and confronts him about it as they're leaving after school.

"Why do you never want to sleep over anymore?" he asks, lips turning down into a slight pout. He always tries his best not to yell at Will, especially since his return, but his tone makes Will flinch anyway.

Will shrugs and doesn't say: *because I'm too afraid to fall asleep in front of other people these days*, doesn't say: *because waking up in an unfamiliar place is probably my biggest fear* (and when did Mike's house

become so unfamiliar to him, he wonders), he doesn't say: *because being around you makes my stomach tie in knots and my palms sweat, and I'm not sure what that means for our friendship anymore.*

Instead he sadly says: "I just can't."

Mike sighs and rolls his eyes.

"You're not a good liar," he replies, and Will doesn't really know how to respond to that, so he just swings his leg over his bike and starts to pedal away.

"Wait!" Mike cries out, grabbing onto Will's jacket and forcing him to stop.

"What?" Will bites out, shaking his arm out of Mike's grasp. The way he feels around Mike, he knows it's different than how he feels about anyone else - it always has been, and he tries to avoid thinking about it. He's got too much else to deal with these days with on top of whatever it is he feels about Mike.

Mike looks remorseful, eyes sad and mouth twisted downward at the corners.

"It's just...it's for Dustin's birthday this time," Mike says, "so it would be really cool if you were there with all of us. Like...like before."

Will sighs.

"I'll still be there," he says, "just not to stay the night."

Mike's pout is relentless and Will has to look away because he's powerless to that face.

"But how are we going to play flashlight tag at midnight with only three people?"

Will almost laughs at that.

"I kind of doubt the fourth person makes that much of a difference," he says, hiding his smile. Mike picks up on it anyway.

"It does," he replies, voice sounding lighter, "you do. Make a difference, I mean. You should be there, Will."

Will blushes and shrugs and finds himself saying, "Okay. fine, I'll stay the night."

He tries not to laugh at the way Mike bounces up and down excitedly on the balls of his feet, and he rolls his eyes instead.

"Good," Mike replies, "see you tonight. Don't be late!"

Will bikes away, already strategizing how he's going to manage staying up all night. The nightmares don't happen every night anymore, but he can't risk it happening in front of his friends. Not when he's put on such a good face that everything is normal (or as normal as it can be, when the rest of the town is looking at him like he's a science experiment gone wrong) in front of them.

He ends up showing up with a backpack full of comic books, some mixtapes that Jonathan has made for him, and a couple old board games shakily balanced on the handlebars of his bike. Between his stuff, flashlight tag and the copious snacks he knows Dustin will bring, he figures that staying up through the night should be easy enough.

As it turns out, it's the flashlight tag that gets him.

It's just past midnight and they're all running through the fields behind Mike's house, flashlights bobbing in the dark and laughter hushed so no adults wake up and call the police on them for being rambunctious.

Will doesn't realize how far he's run until he's lost sight of everyone else. He's surrounded by trees, grassy hills, and he quickly becomes disoriented. His breathing becomes labored and he swears he hears it - the monster - breathing behind him in every direction that he turns. He's helpless to stop the whimper that crawls from his throat as he sprints in the direction that he thinks Mike's house is in, cold dread settling like a weight in the pit of his stomach.

How do I not know this, he thinks to himself, *I've been to Mike's house a*

million times. How am I lost?

The panic sets in like a cold, wet wave over his body and his knees feel weak. He stumbles forward, flashlight falling out of his hands and rolling downhill somewhere, beyond his reach. At his back he can feel the breath of the demogorgon, wet and thick and threatening.

“Please!” he tries to cry out, but his voice can’t quite break free of the lump of tears caught in his throat. He doesn’t know how long he’s there, kneeling in the grass and shaking, choking on his own breaths, before he sees a light bobbing toward him.

“Will!” Mike’s voice rings out from a distance, filled with laughter. “Caught you!”

Will’s body is flooded with relief and humiliation at the same time as Mike draws nearer.

“Will,” Mike says again as he stops in front of Will, this time sounding concerned.

Will can’t get himself to move or speak or do anything other than shake and think over and over: *you’re safe, you’re safe, you’re safe* (all the while knowing he can never be safe from a monster that lives so effortlessly inside his mind).

“Are you okay?” Mike asks, bending down to place a hand on Will’s shoulder.

“F-fine,” he stutters out, unable to keep his voice from wavering noticeably, “I just lost my flashlight somewhere and I was looking for it.”

He makes an over-exaggerated attempt at searching the grass around him, eyes unfocused and hands shaking beyond his control. Mike’s skeptical gaze weighs heavily on him and Will is too embarrassed to meet his eyes.

“Will,” Mike says softly, kneeling down to join Will on the ground, “are you sure you’re all right?”

He places a steady hand on Will's shaking shoulder and Will is helpless not to flinch. His breath is still coming in ragged inhales, catching on every word he's lodged in his throat since his return - every plea for help, every moment of panic he's choked down in front of his mom or his friends over the past year.

"I don't know," he says after a beat.

His voice is broken, jagged around the edges like he hasn't used it to say an honest word in years and his body has forgotten how to make it work like it used to. He doesn't wait for Mike to respond.

"I still feel like I'm there sometimes, Mike."

He shakes harder at his own admission. The words feel foreign as they fall off his tongue and into the air between them. Though his voice is barely above a whisper, it sounds too loud to his ears, reverberating through his bones like an endless echo.

"It's okay," Mike says.

Will shakes his head desperately.

"It's not," he says, "I can feel it chasing me, and I'm always alone. No one else understands it. No one else -,"

Mike cuts Will off by pulling him against his chest. His thumb rubs comforting circles against the skin just above the collar of Will's shirt.

"I'm here, Will. You're not alone."

Mike's breath tickles gently against Will's ear and despite the apprehension, despite the tight coil of Will's fear-paralyzed muscles, something warm blossoms in Will's chest, opens like a flower in the glow of the sun in Springtime. His heart still pounds, fear still takes up home in the hollows of his bones - but the sick twist of panic in his gut loosens itself just a bit, untying itself in slow increments with each steady *thump, thump, thump* of Mike's heart that reaches Will's ear.

"You're okay," Mike repeats, and Will chances a look into Mike's eyes.

He expects to see pity, or maybe annoyance - annoyance that Will is different. He's back from the upside down, but he's not the same. He's *the boy who came back to life*, though he often wonders whether *alive* is a thing you can call yourself when you're constantly avoiding sleep so you can't give the monsters a chance to chase you.

Instead Will sees the reflection of himself in Mike's concerned stare - small, afraid, but still Will Byers: brave and soft and Mike's best friend.

Will's unsure how long they sit there like that - Will tucked up against Mike, timing his shaking breaths to the abiding cadence of Mike's pulse. It could be seconds or minutes, but it's easy to lose track of the time as Mike's hand stays a warm, enduring weight against his shoulder - an anchor grounding him gently in a soft embrace.

When they do get up to walk back toward the house, Mike takes Will's hand in his own. Their fingers stay intertwined as the circle of light from Mike's flashlight illuminates the path in front of them. Fear still prickles at the back of Will's neck, he jumps at every unexpected sound and his legs are unsteady beneath him. But Mike's whispers of *you're not alone*, permeate through the heavy veil of darkness and thread themselves around his brain in a repetitious loop, a song he never wants to forget.

Author's Note:

You can follow me on tumblr at [mygaysonwill!](#)